

Chapter 1: Introduction

As part of the forest plan revision process, the Coronado National Forest is required to undergo an assessment of areas that meet the criteria for potential wilderness. We followed the wilderness evaluation process as outlined in Forest Service Handbook 1909.12, Chapter 70. This process consists of three steps: identification of potential areas, evaluation of potential areas, and recommendation of potential areas. Documentation of the inventory process may be located in the Forest Plan Revision project record. This document covers the second step in the process, the evaluation of the potential areas. The recommendations that result from this evaluation will be included in the Coronado National Forest revised forest plan. All three steps in the process are outlined in more detail below.

Identification of Potential Wilderness

The Forest Service handbook provides the following instructions for identifying potential wilderness:

The first step in the evaluation of potential wilderness is to identify and inventory all areas within National Forest System (NFS) lands that satisfy the definition of wilderness found in section 2(c) of the 1964 Wilderness Act. (FSH 1909.12, Chapter 71)

The conditions for meeting the first step of the process on the Coronado National Forest are:

1. The area must be at least 5,000 acres in size or meet at least one of the following conditions:
 - a. Can be preserved due to physical terrain and natural conditions
 - b. Self-contained ecosystems, such as an island, that can be effectively managed as a separate unit of the National Wilderness Preservation System
 - c. Contiguous to existing wilderness, primitive areas, Administration-endorsed wilderness, or potential wilderness in other Federal ownership, regardless of their size
2. The area must not contain forest roads (36 CFR 212.1) or other permanently authorized roads.
3. The area does not have any improvements beyond the scope allowed per FSH 1909.12 Ch. 71.11.
4. The area meets the criteria for dealing with roaded areas, fingers, and other extrusions developed by the Southwestern Region Wilderness Evaluation Working Group.
5. The area meets the statutory definition of wilderness as outlined in Section 2(c) of the Wilderness Act.

The Coronado National Forest lands were thoroughly analyzed to determine which areas met the above criteria for identification of potential wilderness. Thirty-three areas resulted from the analysis, as shown in appendix A. The potential wilderness areas under consideration include 3 wilderness study areas, 9 additions to existing wilderness, 1 addition to a wilderness study area, and 20 new wilderness areas. Boundaries originally generated through a GIS exercise were adjusted using local knowledge to remove conflicts and to make the boundaries more easily locatable on the ground.

Evaluation of Potential Wilderness

Capability

The Forest Service handbook defines capability as:

The capability of a potential wilderness is the degree to which that area contains the basic characteristics that make it suitable for wilderness recommendation without regard to its availability for or need as wilderness. (FSH 1909.12 Chapter 72.1)

During this stage, the 33 potential wilderness areas (PWAs) that were inventoried were evaluated for their capability. The PWAs were rated on 15 criteria, and a score for each area was determined. The criteria from FSH 1909.12 Chapter 72.1 relate to naturalness, opportunities for solitude or primitive and unconfined recreation, undeveloped, special features, and manageability. These criteria, listed in appendix B, were developed by the Southwestern Region Wilderness Evaluation Working Group for use in the Forest Service Southwestern Region (Arizona and New Mexico).

During the capability assessment process, each PWA was assigned a high, medium, or low rating on each criterion. A breakdown of these scores by PWA can be found in appendix E. An overall rating for each area was determined by the number of high, medium, or low ratings an area received. The number of high, medium, and low ratings was totaled and an overall average was determined for each area. If an area had 8 or more high ratings for the 15 criteria, the area got a high rating for capability. Similarly, an area that received eight or more medium criterion ratings received an overall rating of medium, and eight or more low ratings was given a low rating overall.

According to Southwestern Region Special Area Guidance, “if an area is determined to have medium to low capability, it may be dropped from further evaluation.” Within the context of our evaluation, any area that received a low rating for capability was not evaluated for availability or need. After the capability evaluation was complete, 2 of the 33 PWAs were not considered for further evaluation, because they scored low for capability. These areas did not proceed to the availability and need assessments. These areas are listed in appendix J and a breakdown of the score for each area is available in appendix E. All of the PWAs that rated medium or high were analyzed for both availability and need—there were no further eliminations during those stages of the process.

Availability

The Forest Service handbook provides the following direction on the availability of an area as potential wilderness:

All National Forest System lands determined to meet wilderness capability requirements are considered potentially available for wilderness designation. However, the determination of availability is conditioned by the value of and need for the wilderness resource compared to the value of and need for other resources. (FSH 1909.12 Chapter 72.2)

The availability of an area for wilderness designation is based on the tradeoffs involved in managing the area for wilderness character versus current and potential future uses. During this step, the remaining 31 PWAs were analyzed to determine their potential for other resource uses including:

- recreation, including tourism
- wildlife species, population, and management needs,
- water availability and use,
- livestock operations,
- timber,
- minerals,
- cultural resources,
- authorized and potential uses, and

- management considerations including fire, insects, disease, and presence of non-Federal lands.¹

Wilderness management imposes restrictions on the use of motorized equipment in the wilderness, on motorized and mechanized travel within the wilderness, and on the construction of new roads. Additionally, some management actions require the approval of the regional forester before they can be implemented in designated wilderness. These factors must be considered when determining the availability of an area for wilderness designation.

In some areas, the management of a particular resource or program may benefit from the wilderness restrictions. In that case, the availability for wilderness designation is rated high with regard to the resource. However, if the wilderness restrictions negatively affect management of a resource, then the area is rated low for availability with regard to the resource. Often wilderness designation has a mixed impact on other resources, both positive and negative effects. If there is no net positive or net negative impact, or if the balance between the positive and negative effects is unclear, the availability is rated as medium. Areas with few or no conflicting uses are ranked high for availability. The criteria are listed in appendix C, along with an explanation of the rating process. A breakdown of the score for each area is available in appendix F.

Need

Forest Service handbook direction regarding need for wilderness:

Determine the need for an area to be designated as wilderness through an analysis of the degree to which it contributes to the overall National Wilderness Preservation System. ... Deal with “need” on a regional basis and evaluate such factors as the geographic distribution of areas and representations of landforms and ecosystems. (FSH 1909.12 Chapter 72.3)

The need assessment rated the PWAs on six factors that can be found in FSH 1909.12 Chapter 72.31. These factors consider the following:

- wilderness lands in the vicinity
- visitor pressure
- nonwilderness lands in the vicinity²
- primitive sanctuary for plants and wildlife
- capacity of established wilderness areas
- wilderness areas with similar landforms and vegetation

The criteria and procedures for rating the PWAs according to these factors can be found in appendix D. Public review and comment must also be considered in the need assessment, although there are no ratings associated with this component. A separate report entitled Coronado National Forest Wilderness Need Evaluation has been prepared discussing the need evaluation in detail and is available at http://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/coronado/landmanagement/planning/?cid=fswdev7_018673. This report includes a detailed analysis of each of the above factors and findings for each potential wilderness area. The information provided for need discussions in this report is a summary of the findings in that report.

¹ (Source: FSH 1909.12, Chapter 74)

² The need assessment considers nonwilderness lands in the vicinity that are likely to provide opportunities for unconfined outdoor recreation experiences

Public Involvement and Alternative Development

Public involvement and input is an essential component of the need analysis. Beginning in March 2010, six open-house events were held in geographic locations across the Forest's service area to present the draft revised forest plan and plan-related documents to the public. Initial evaluations of ten potential wilderness areas were shared to elucidate public input on the need for new wilderness areas. These ten potential wilderness areas include the Chiricahua Addition South (formerly Chiricahua Addition), Dagoon, East Catalina, Galiuro Addition, Mount Wrightson Addition, Ku Chish (formerly North Chiricahua), Samaniego Ridge, Tumacacori, Whetstone, and Winchester Potential Wilderness Areas. Approximately 200 individuals attended, representing 54 groups and organizations. Each open house was structured to provide flexibility to attendees, in that they did not need to commit a specific or large block of time to participate. However, many people stayed for two hours or more, engaging in discussions with the resource specialists and other participants.

In an effort to obtain a more comprehensive inventory of potential wilderness areas, and in response to public commentary, the Coronado National Forest planning team completed a second inventory of potential wilderness areas on the forest. The Coronado National Forest lands were thoroughly analyzed to determine which areas met the criteria for identification of potential wilderness. A total of thirty-three areas resulted from the secondary analysis, as shown in appendix A. These draft potential wilderness evaluation reports will be shared with the public for feedback in the summer of 2013, in conjunction with the 90-day public comment period for the revised forest plan. The public feedback will be considered and incorporated into the reports, as appropriate.

The Proposed Action for the forest plan recommends 26,266 acres in the Chiricahua Mountains for congressional designation as the Ku Chish Wilderness. This area is recommended for wilderness designation because it ranked highly for both capability and availability of the area as potential wilderness, based on the criteria found in FSH 1909.12, chapter 70. The area received a medium ranking for the need assessment, based on the criteria described in FSH 1909.12 chapter 72.3. This area's rugged condition and high quality wilderness character combined with its manageability make it the strongest candidate for wilderness recommendation based on the evaluation.

The Proposed Action also recommends 61,315 acres in the Pinaleno Mountains as the Mount Graham Wilderness. The Mount Graham Recommended Wilderness Area is the same area as the congressionally designated Mount Graham Wilderness Study Area. The Mount Graham Wilderness Study Area was established by Congress in 1984 and was recommended for wilderness designation in the 1986 Coronado National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan, although this recommendation was never acted upon by Congress. The recommendation is carried forward because the area received high rankings for capability. Although this area ranked medium for availability and low for need, it is recommended largely based on the existing congressional status as a wilderness study area. As such, this area has been consistently managed to preserve wilderness character since its congressional designation in the Arizona Wilderness Act of 1984.

Both the Ku Chish Recommended Wilderness Area and the Mount Graham Recommended Wilderness Area have attracted high levels of public interest, based on the presence of wilderness characteristics, the refugia provided for threatened and endangered species, and the outstanding recreational opportunities available within the areas. Under the Proposed Action, the Ku Chish Recommended Wilderness Area and the Mount Graham Recommended Wilderness Area would be managed to maintain wilderness character, preserving the area as "untrammelled, natural, and undeveloped, with outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation" (Wilderness Act of 1964).

In March 2012, after considering internal input and the information in the evaluation report, the Forest Leadership Team recommended to include the following areas in Alternative One: Ku Chish, Mount Graham WSA, Chiricahua Addition North, Chiricahua Addition West, Whetstone, Bunk Robinson WSA, Whitmire Canyon WSA, Mount Wrightson Addition, Mount Fagan, Tumacacori, Dragoon, Winchester, Santa Teresa Addition North, Santa Teresa Addition South, Galiuro Addition, and Jhus Canyon. Collectively, these areas represent the following categories of potential wilderness on the Coronado National Forest: wilderness study areas, high interest areas according to public commentary, additions to existing wilderness that present manageable land areas, areas with minimal or no motorized use due to rugged terrain and remoteness, and areas that rate highly for both capability and need. The procedure for assembling a comprehensive selection of additional wilderness areas appropriately considered the management concerns and availability issues that come with a large expansion of recommended wilderness on national forest lands.

Recommendation of Potential Wilderness

This document, the report on potential wilderness evaluation, was used by the leadership of the Coronado National Forest to determine if any of the candidate areas will be forwarded to the regional forester (the deciding official) for consideration. The forest supervisor's recommendations to the regional forester will be documented in the proposed revised Coronado National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (also known as the forest plan), and public comments will be accepted and considered throughout the plan revision process. There are no recommendations contained within this document, only an analysis of the potential wilderness areas.

This document does analyze potential outcomes of recommending or not recommending each area, given the range of alternatives considered in the forest plan revision. The Effects of Recommendation analysis evaluates: (1) the interim management direction in the proposed action and Alternative 1 as the basis for a recommended wilderness scenario in each area and (2) the impact on the area if it were designated by Congress. This is appropriate because the amount of time between an agency recommendation and final action by Congress has been highly variable, taking between a few months and several decades to complete. For the nonwilderness scenario, the potential outcomes of plan alternatives that do not recommend that potential wilderness area are evaluated. This analysis synthesizes the findings from the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) and associated specialist reports, as well as considering site-specific issues that were evaluated as part of the capability, availability and need analysis. Any areas analyzed in this report, are eligible for recommendation in the revised forest plan. This means that even if the areas are not part of the proposed action for the revised forest plan, this does not mean their recommendation cannot be part of the final plan that is approved in the record of decision. Likewise, even though an area is in the proposed action, it may not be carried forward in the final decision.

All of the potential wilderness areas recommended by the regional forester in the forest plan will receive further review by the Chief of the Forest Service. If the Chief intends to move forward with a wilderness recommendation, the Forest Service will complete a detailed analysis of the tradeoffs in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act. Although the Chief can recommend areas for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System, it takes an act of Congress to designate a wilderness area.